

Nation Building in Afghanistan?  
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Afghanistan has been a problem since Alexander the Great tramped through on his way to India. It became a bigger problem when the Russian Empire (Afghanistan's neighbor) and the British Empire (recent colonizer of India) kept Afghanistan unstable between 1839-1919. Almost all of their interference ended in defeat for the attackers.

Afghanistan did not exist until the mid 19th century. It was the "wild-east" of the Persian Empire (a wild place with a few silk-route cities surrounded by a multiplicity of tribes), a place illustrative of how different urban and tribal life can be. The Persians always had difficulty in bringing the region under rule of law, and their problem is reflected to this very day.

Modern Afghanistan is no more a unified country than it was in the past. The Russian campaign to weaken the Persian Empire succeeded when they, with British compliance, lopped off Persia's eastern province and called it Afghanistan. The Russians simultaneously absorbed Persia's Caucuses into their own empire (the present day's Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia). Persia, in its weakness, lost 50% of its territory at that time.

The infamous struggle to dominate the Afghan region was marked by a series of wars: some internal wars where one Afghan faction attempted to conquer another (or others). Some of these wars briefly succeeded, ultimately to be reversed. There was no difference in the outcome when the then-powerful British or powerful Russians attempted conquest. Initial victories quickly turned to routs. In one famous war, the Afghans managed to defeat and kill an entire British regiment, leaving only one man alive to stumble out to tell the world.

Russia could gloat over what happened to the British there, but they had their own nightmare war between 1979-89, which resulted in horrific casualties and began a drug problem that is still with them. They were the first force ruthless enough to have succeeded in taming and modernizing Afghanistan had it not been for the United States intervening on the side of the worst Islamist factions with stingers, shoulder-launched missiles. This defeated Soviet air superiority.

This was one Cold War result that was not good. Driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan plunged the country into a ten-year civil war that destroyed any possibility of national identity. It also opened the door to the Taliban takeover, giving Afghanistan another dark age under fundamentalist Islamist rule.

The Soviet Union did not improve the lives of any of their Soviet Bloc subjects; all were happy to get their freedom. But in this one case, had the Soviets succeeded in taming Afghanistan, they would have done the Afghans (and the world) a favor. Under Soviet occupation, the capital, Kabul, flowered into a modernizing city with western flavor. Young women dressed in western clothes, went to co-ed colleges, and the people in Kabul enjoyed the coffee shops, cinemas, theaters, and radio/TV programs enjoyed in Western cities. Villages got schools (first time ever) and a system of highways united the country's internal communications. This all came to an end due to Russia's ultimate defeat and the fanatical Islamists victory.

The US had its first go at taming Afghanistan, which, like others in the country's history, initially succeeded (the invasion was easy) but is ultimately failing. The cultural differences between urban life (the few big cities) and tribal/rural life has grown more stark. The modernizing cities are all in danger of falling once more into the dark ages of militant Islam.

The Trump Administration has inherited this non-ending war, but with one difference: they claim that there will be no more "nation building." The Secretary of State condemned our previous attempts at "telling other people how to live." However, he said that a few conditions must be on the table for peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban: education for all boys and girls; women may be employed in all fields, including the military and the judiciary; elections after installing an interim government that includes the Taliban. How is that not Nation Building?

667 words

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